

Oregon News

Brown defends plan to lift mask mandate

■ Governor acknowledges that most of Oregon's counties have vaccination rates lower than what's needed for herd immunity

By Erin Ross
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown acknowledged Friday, June 11, that ending a statewide mask mandate will place greater risks on already-vulnerable people and communities. But during a contentious news conference, she stood firm on her decision to lift the mandate once the state reaches its vaccination goal.

Oregon currently plans to lift most restrictions once 70% of the state's adults have received at least one COVID-19 vaccination. As of Sunday, June 13, 67.9% of eligible adults were vaccinated.

At the June 11 briefing, Brown reiterated that she is "very concerned" about communities and populations that have not yet had sufficient access to the vaccine. Although progress has been made closing the vaccine equity gap, the percentage of people vaccinated varies wildly from county to county — and even ZIP code to ZIP code.

Lane County passed a vaccination milestone this week: Over 65% of its eligible adults have received a first dose. Clackamas County is not far behind, Brown said. Once that benchmark is passed, Lane and Clackamas counties can move into "lower-risk" restrictions. Benton, Deschutes, Hood River, Lincoln, Multnomah and Washington counties are the only other counties to have reached that goal.

That means 29 of Oregon's 36 counties have not yet reached that particular benchmark. But when the state hits the 70% vaccination rate benchmark, which is expected to happen sometime in the next few weeks, they will also reopen, regardless of vaccination levels and the amount of COVID-19 spreading locally.

"We still have more work to do to ensure all Oregonians are healthy



Jaime Valdez/Oregon Capital Insider

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, seen here in June 2020.

"We still have more work to do to ensure all Oregonians are healthy are protected from COVID-19."

— Oregon Gov. Kate Brown.

and protected from COVID-19," Brown said.

Governor Kate Brown wears an orange traffic safety vest and a mask that has the words "Get covered 2021" printed on it.

Brown announced additional incentives to encourage the vaccine-hesitant to go get their first shot. Anyone who received their first vaccine dose June 11 at the drive-through vaccination site near Portland International Airport was given a \$100 gift card, while supplies last. The same offer was available Saturday, June 12 at the mass vaccination clinic at the Oregon Convention Center.

Although many businesses could soon reopen fully, the economic damage from the COVID-19 pandemic still lingers. Brown said she has extended Oregon's foreclosure moratorium until Sept. 30.

She was unable to extend the eviction moratorium, which will expire at the end of June.

Oregonians currently have until next year to pay off any late rent accrued between April 2020 and June 2021. But all renters will need to pay their July rent, or face eviction. Brown encouraged those who might be unable to pay rent this July to apply for federally funded rent assistance, through oregonrentalassistance.org.

The number of new COVID-19 cases went down across Oregon for the sixth straight week. Deaths and hospitalizations have also continued to decrease.

Critical questions about ongoing risk

Many of the reporters' questions at Brown's June 11 press conference focused on her decision to lift Oregon's mask mandate once 70% of adults in the state have received their first dose.

When that benchmark is reached, only about half of all individuals in the state will have received their first vaccine dose, and fewer than half will be fully vaccinated. And

16 Oregon counties — including Baker — have yet to give first doses to half of their adult residents. The mask mandate and social distancing measures that have been credited for helping limit disease spread for much of the pandemic will be removed, and it will still be some time before enough people will have been vaccinated to reach herd immunity. That's the threshold at which enough people have become immune to COVID-19 that it is unlikely to continue spreading.

Although masks do provide some protection to the wearer, they are much better at preventing someone from spreading disease than they are at preventing someone from contracting it. Without a mask mandate, unvaccinated Oregonians will need to trust that the maskless around them have been vaccinated and do not have COVID-19.

Brown and State Epidemiologist Dr. Dean Sidelinger both acknowledged that reopening will increase risk for unvaccinated people — including those who are not willingly in this category.

"I have a friend who is struggling with cancer right now," Brown said. "They are extremely vulnerable, and they wear a mask because it is their best protection against COVID-19."

But right now, those individuals are also protected by social distancing measures and masks, which reduce the amount of virus a person exhales. When mask mandates lift, Sidelinger suggested, vulnerable Oregonians might simply choose not to enter crowded indoor spaces with unmasked people. As more grocery stores roll back their mask rules and rely on the honor system, the list of safe indoor spaces continues to shrink.

When asked what steps the Oregon government can take to protect those people, Sidelinger gave a

number of suggestions people could take to protect themselves, and requested people wear masks and "be kind to each other, and think about the actions we are taking if we're not vaccinated," echoing past pleas for Oregon residents to mask up and socially distance when those safety measures were voluntary, not required by the government.

Brown also acknowledged that those risks will fall primarily on already-vulnerable people and communities.

"We're not seeing a huge uptake of vaccinations, and I am gravely concerned. What we know is that many of these communities tend to be both medically and economically vulnerable, and it will be very, very challenging for the health care systems in these local communities if COVID-19 spreads rapidly," Brown said.

When asked if it was equitable to remove masks, which have been a crucial tool that protects the unwillingly unvaccinated from vaccine-hesitant people, Brown stated she was following guidance laid out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

CDC guidelines currently recommend that unvaccinated people wear masks indoors, and experts have pushed back against the Biden administration's decision to remove the mask mandates for people who have been fully vaccinated.

When asked at the news conference to explain her decision not to follow this part of the CDC's guidance, Brown deferred to Sidelinger, who again encouraged people to wear masks.

Brown was pressed further to say if she would permit unvaccinated individuals to not wear masks in most situations indoors.

"Honestly, she said, "it will be up to folks who are unvaccinated."

OREGON LEGISLATURE

House wants to delay paid family leave

■ Bill, which moves to the Senate, would move starting date from 2022 to 2023

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon's new program of paid family leave would be delayed under a bill that has cleared the House.

A vote of 33-19 on Tuesday, June 8, moved House Bill 3398 to the Senate.

The starting date for contributions by employers and employees would be put off by one year, from Jan. 1, 2022, to Jan. 1, 2023. The starting date for benefit payments would be Sept. 3, 2023, instead of Jan. 1.

The 2019 Legislature approved the program. Eight other states and Washington, D.C., have started or are preparing similar programs.

"This is an important program that had some pretty aggressive timelines to begin with," Majority Leader Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland,

said in presenting the bill.

"It's really important that we get it right. It's important for employers and employees."

Employers would contribute 40% and employees 60% of a new fund based on payroll deductions. Workers who earn at least \$1,000 during the previous year would qualify for up to 12 weeks of paid family leave, the maximum benefit set at \$1,215 per week.

Oregon's program is more generous than a proposal by President Joe Biden for a federal program, which would offer up to \$4,000 per month. Congress has not acted on the federal program, which is part of Biden's American Families Plan.

Acting Director David Gerstenfeld said the Employment Department sought the delay because it intends to integrate

collections of employer and employee contributions into its computer modernization project, which will start its long-awaited first phase in July. The first phase also involves updating the collection of payroll taxes that employers pay into the state unemployment trust fund for benefits. Employees do not pay into that fund.

Though preparations for the new program have proceeded since the Legislature passed it in 2019, Gerstenfeld said staff — including himself — were diverted to handle new and expanded federal unemployment benefit programs since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

"The original statutory timelines were created before a lot of work had been done to see what would be needed to build the technology and the work processes to make it successful from the day it becomes available to the public," Gerstenfeld told the House Rules Committee on May 27, when it heard the bill. "Also importantly, it was before the pandemic."

Until Gov. Kate Brown fired Gerstenfeld's predecessor and named Gerstenfeld as acting director of the agency on May 31, 2020, Gerstenfeld led the new paid family leave program. He was shifted into that job in 2019, after eight years as director of its unemployment insurance division.

HOMELESS

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"This bill would place residents in our communities at risk by restricting local government's power to limit homeless camps," commissioners Kevin Cameron, Danielle Bethell and Colm Willis wrote.

Legal experts testified that the bill's standards are consistent with recent federal case law.

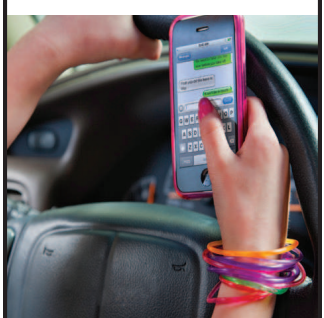
The Oregon Law Center noted that the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that homeless people cannot be punished for sleeping outside on public property in the absence of adequate alternatives, or unless the law imposes "reasonable time, place and manner" restrictions on regulated activities in public space.

"Passage of (the bill) will preserve the important pieces of the cases in state law, written in a way that has been agreed upon by key stakeholders," said Becky Straus, staff attorney with the Oregon Law Center.

If Brown signs the bill, it will take effect on July 1, 2023.

Straus said it would force local governments to review their camping and related ordinances "in a way that recognizes the reality of Oregon's rising rates of homelessness."

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